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Disappearing Acts: Reclaiming Intersectionality in the Social Sciences in a Post-Black Feminist Era

Nikol G. Alexander-Floyd

The article investigates how post-black feminist definitions of intersectionality in the social sciences have “disappeared” black women as knowledge producers and subjects of investigation. This post-black feminist turn in theorizing intersectionality is assessed in terms of the rhetorical strategies critiqued by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1990–91) in her foundational work on intersectionality, demonstrating how the very strategies she identified as hegemonic limitations to black feminism have been incorporated into social science work produced in the name of intersectional investigation, thus re-subjugating black women’s knowledge. A reconstructive liberatory project in the name of intersectionality is suggested that would entail scholars across the disciplines implementing hermeneutical and/or narrative methodologies that center on black women’s subjectivity.

Keywords: black feminism / intersectionality / postfeminism / post-race / social sciences

In her seminal essay “The Occult of True Black Womanhood” (1996), black feminist Ann duCille dissects the cultural and political dimensions of the newfound interest in black women as academic subjects in the closing decades of the last millennium. As she notes, where black feminist studies across fields had for decades remained a marginalized academic space advanced by pioneering black feminists whose work represented a labor of love, the 1980s and 1990s brought with it an explosion of interest in black women’s studies, particularly by white feminists, black men, and others who were not black feminists. Although duCille and others advocated for increased attention to black feminism and

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black women as academic subjects, the frenzy surrounding the study of black women in the academy reached “occult status.” For duCille, moreover, the occult of true black womanhood represented a contemporary example of the commodification of black women. bell hooks likens such commodification to the consumption or “eating [of] the Other” (hooks, qtd. in duCille 1996, 82). This commodification and consumption had deleterious effects on both black women academics and black women as subjects of research. In terms of the former, the occult of true black womanhood heightened the “crisis of Black female intellectuals” (118). The right to claim expertise in the study of black women was open to everyone, but black women—not the scores of scholars partaking in the occult—were in high demand as purveyors of gendered, racial representation (especially, for instance, to serve on committees to speak as or for the Other). As to the latter, the occult of true black womanhood, duCille observed, was marked by scholarship that, in fact, diminished the very subject that it wanted to “honor” “by treating it not like a discipline with a history and a body of rigorous scholarship underpinning it, but like an anybody-can-play pickup game played on an open field” (95). In this way, the black feminist academic terrain was misappropriated. Scholars, moreover, driven by this occult, hailed their work as “new scholarship,” “go[ing] . . . in fact [where] others have gone before” (ibid.).

Barely a decade into the new millennium, a new wave of raced-gendered occultic commodification is afoot, one focusing not on black female subjectivity per se, but on the concept of intersectionality. Importantly, each wave of consumption of the Other bears the mark of the social and political context of its time. In the era that duCille describes, a motley mix of black feminist agitation and scholarship as well as a widespread institutional emphasis on multiculturalism spawned the occult of true black womanhood. Two competing currents shape the contemporary moment: a postmodern avoidance of identity and a postfeminist deployment of feminism focused on incorporation and formal equality. A postmodernist approach problematizes identity by suggesting that we all are said to have ruptured identities and fragmented bodies (Gillman 2010). This approach de-legitimizes the study of racism, sexism, and the structural bases of inequality and activism and further threatens black women’s scholarly authority on black women’s subjectivity. Conversely, postfeminist, post-racial (in this case, specifically, post-black feminist) forces undermine radical black feminism, not only through direct backlash, but also through its seeming incorporation of liberal forms of inclusion; indeed, post-black feminism emphasizes gender and racial representation while short-circuiting more far-reaching social and political change (Tasker and Negra 2007).

In this article, I explore the latter of these two forces confronting black feminist theory by examining two rhetorical strategies drawn from social science scholarship that effect the disappearance of black women and black feminist scholarship, namely: the “universalizing tendency” and the “bait-and-switch.”

Ironically, these rhetorical strategies are two of the discursive strategies that Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1990–91), widely regarded as the originator of the term “intersectionality,” highlighted as hallmarks of the knowledge/power dynamics that marginalize black women’s interests and that she intended intersectionality to critique. Like other “traveling theories” (Said 1983), intersectionality falls prey to the press of power struggles internal to fields and disciplines as well as to the unique circumstances surrounding its circulation (Knapp 2005). I suggest that the pressure to conform research to dominant modes of inquiry persists across disciplines and presents a serious challenge to intersectionality, as reflected by the manifestation of these discursive strategies that (re)marginalize black women and other women of color.

Two points about the parameters of my discussion are in order. First, although I focus my analysis on the work of Leslie McCall (2005), a sociologist, and Ange-Marie Hancock (2007a, 2007b), a political scientist, I mean no easy equation between sociology and political science in terms of their methodological priorities/diversity or the proliferation of intersectionality in these disciplines.¹ I focus on their work because they exemplify these rhetorical strategies and because their work is among the most well-known research on intersectionality emanating from the social sciences.² Second, a range of women of color from different spatiotemporal contexts have advanced the broad project of intersectionality. I focus on black women in the United States, because, as an African Americanist, I take special interest in black women as political subjects and knowledge producers and also because Crenshaw draws her initial theorizing from black feminism.³

In developing my argument, I first clarify the definition of intersectionality, then move on to examine each of the two rhetorical strategies in McCall’s and Hancock’s most definitive works on this subject. I end with a discussion of narrative analysis as an important vehicle for reorienting intersectionality research and suggest that a reconstructive liberatory project in the name of intersectionality would entail scholars across the disciplines implementing hermeneutical and/or narrative methodologies centered on black women’s subjectivity.

Intersectionality as Ideograph and Idea

What is intersectionality? How do we make sense of its different definitions? At the outset, it is useful to distinguish between intersectionality as an “ideograph” and intersectionality as an “idea”; I borrow this distinction from the work of noted interdisciplinary studies expert Linora Salter (2002). Drawing on Michael Calvin McGee’s (1980) notion of an ideograph, Salter suggests that interdisciplinarity is not only a specific idea—that is, the integration of disciplinary knowledge—but also an ideograph or a term that stands in for a larger ideological imperative. As she explains, “a single word can be used to stand in for whole philosophical or ideological approaches . . . they represent

a paradigm wrapped up in a single word” (64). As an ideograph, interdisciplinarity conveys a “challenge to the intellectual priorities of the university”; it is often resisted on this basis, not on the idea of interdisciplinarity (64–65). Similarly, we can draw a distinction between intersectionality as an ideograph and intersectionality as an idea. As an ideograph, intersectionality serves as a catch-all word that stands in for the broad body of scholarship that has sought to examine and redress the oppressive forces that have constrained the lives of black women in particular and women of color more generally. As an idea or an analytically distinct concept, intersectionality is a moniker, identified with Crenshaw (1989), meant to describe the “intersecting” or co-determinative forces of racism, sexism, and classism in the lives of black women.

It is necessary to assess intersectionality as both an idea and an ideograph in order to maintain the integrity of intersectionality research, including in the social sciences. First, Crenshaw’s work on intersectionality (that is, intersectionality as a specific idea) is part of the larger body of work on theorizing black women’s oppression and the relationship among race, class, and gender (that is, intersectionality as an ideograph). Most often, however, given the popularity of Crenshaw’s work, these two dimensions of its usage are collapsed. Opponents of identity politics, for instance, criticize intersectionality à la Crenshaw as a means of dismissing attention to identity and/or a focus on race, class, and gender (that is, intersectionality in its ideographic sense). Second, many scholars reduce intersectionality to the definition provided by Crenshaw, but do so without significant attention to the depth of her theorizing regarding intersectionality and its application. People refer to her famous analogy between an automobile crash at an intersection and the interplay of racism and sexism, for instance, but ignore her call to center on women of color’s experiences, the varieties of intersectionality she discusses, and the specific rhetorical strategies she criticizes as ineffective. Third, scholars, including social scientists, generally ignore intersectionality’s ideographic dimension (which I discuss in greater detail below)—that is, the longstanding project of theorizing by women of color about identity from which it is directly derived. Left at bay, too, is intersectionality’s inherent challenge to methodological business as usual within the academy.

The conflation of the ideational and ideographic dimensions of intersectionality and its de-historicized renderings has fomented growing concern about its problematic uses. In a conversation among key figures in intersectionality scholarship, Crenshaw remarks that her “own use of the term ‘intersectionality’ was just a metaphor” and that she is “amazed at how it gets over- and underused” (qtd. in Berger and Guidroz 2009a, 65). Indeed, she “can’t even recognize it in the literature anymore” (ibid.). Similarly, Michelle Fine registers concern about the “‘flattening’ of intersectionality,” that is, a failure to recognize the structural sources of inequality” (ibid., 70). Crenshaw suggests that this “flattening” results through “just multiplying identity categories rather than constituting a structural analysis or a political critique” (ibid.). Although some, particularly in the

social sciences, take the multiplying of categories as intersectionality, political scientist Julia Jordan-Zachery (2007) points out that this is merely “descriptive . . . [and] ignores the liberation/political framework of intersectionality” (261). Some feminists also bewail the “abstract[ion]” of intersectionality and its divorce from the lived experiences of black women (Crunktastic and Susiemaye 2010) as well as the historical amnesia regarding its origins in the political organizing and theorizing of women of color.⁴

This flattening of our understanding of intersectionality stems from the fact that, as Gudrun-Axeli Knapp (2005) observes, intersectionality operates as what Derrida has identified as a “doxographic discourse”—that is, one of the various “meta-theoretical discourses in which theories tend to move as taxonomic entities” (Derrida quoted in Knapp 254). In this mode of travel, theories are generally “mentioned not used” (ibid.). The mere “mentioning” allows for diffuse circulation, “being largely stripped of the baggage of concretion, of context and history” (254–55). To be done with integrity, intersectionality research must take into account both its ideographic and ideational dimensions in “reclaiming [the] baggage” of its substance (261). In what follows in this section, I note a significant, although not exhaustive, constellation of works in the ideographic development of intersectionality and outline Crenshaw’s (1989) theories.

In its ideographic sense, intersectionality is a broad project focused on social justice theorizing and action and has a long and complex history. As other commentators have noted (see, for example, Berger and Guidroz 2009b; Dill and Zambrana 2009), black women, along with other women of color, have for decades taken up the charge of clarifying the operation of power to delimit their freedom and equality. Some commentators point to actors from prior centuries, such as nineteenth-century political agitator Maria Stewart (Dill and Zambrana 2009) and scholar Anna Julia Cooper, who penned *A Voice from the South* (1892), a treatise that highlights challenges facing black women, among other things, as early intersectionality progenitors (see May 2007). Whatever intersectionality’s received point of origin, to be sure, efforts to address the multiple dimensions of black women’s oppression have crystallized in the past four decades. Feminists of color, in general, active in mid-twentieth-century social movements and in developing women’s and gender studies, have pressed the project of intersectionality in a concerted way.

Frances Beale’s “Double Jeopardy” (1970), for instance, is a classic piece that highlighted the notion of double jeopardy, or the idea that black women faced not only racism, but also sexism as negative socioeconomic and political forces. Deborah K. King’s (1988) exploration of multiple jeopardy more directly emphasized the significance not only of race and gender, but also of class in black women’s struggles. The Combahee River Collective (1982) produced a statement of black feminist principles that has had a singular influence on black feminism. Its members articulated a vision of political theory that emphasized that race, gender, class, and sexuality were all equally important and indivisible

in their operation in the lives of black women. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's (1992) meditation on race as a metalanguage focuses our attention on the ways in which race becomes an overriding organizing category for the understanding and articulation of politics. And, of course, Patricia Hill Collins's *Black Feminist Thought* (2000) is a ubiquitous touchstone for many black feminists. While there are other works that reflect on the relationship among various analytic categories, these have served as pivotal texts, effecting watersheds in black feminist theorizing.

Black feminists across disciplines have fashioned an impressive array of knowledge production on intersectionality. In history, for instance, black feminists, such as Darlene Clark Hine (1994), Deborah Gray White ([1985]1999), and E. Frances White (2001), have orchestrated black women's history as a flourishing subfield, with a range of explorations of black women as social, economic, and political actors. In psychology and human development, black feminists have tackled such difficult and important topics as black feminist-identity development (White 2008), black women and domestic violence (Few 1999), and contemporary sexual scripts (Stephens and Phillips 2003). Sociology has witnessed black feminist scholarly production that ranges from theoretical examinations, à la Collins (2000), to investigations of race, gender, and class inequality in black families (Dill 1994), to black feminist social movements (Springer 2005). Literature remains a fecund environment for black feminism as well, with now several generation of scholars like Hortense Spillers (2003), Judylyn Ryan (2005), and Kathy L. Glass (2006), among many others. Although their points of emphasis and frameworks vary (Collins's [2000] standpoint theory is inconsistent with the work of, say, White [2001]), black feminists have worked to examine black women's unique realities as black women.

In her work on intersectionality, Crenshaw builds on black feminist scholarship that transcends the narrow confines of a race- or gender-only analysis in two influential pieces: "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex" (1989) and "Mapping the Margins" (1990–91). Her groundedness in prior theorizing is evident throughout both articles. Indeed, it is significant that she begins her analysis in "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex" by discussing the decisive black feminist text *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave* (Hull, Bell-Scott, and Smith 1982). For Crenshaw, the title captures the perennial failure of mainstream feminist and antiracist politics to reflect the experience of racism and sexism that befalls black women. Turning her sights to the legal arena, Crenshaw sets out to describe and critique how black women's unique experiences exceed the single-axis framework dominant in legal doctrine as well as in feminist and antiracist politics.

At the heart of her analysis, Crenshaw (1989) offers an illustration of intersectionality as a traffic intersection in which there is an accident. She writes: "Consider an analogy to traffic in an intersection. . . . Discrimination, like traffic . . . may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident

happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed . . . her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination” (149). The experiences of black women, she explains, can parallel those of white women or black men and be defined by both sexism and racism or be unique to black women as a social category. In contrast to this messy, variegated reality, discrimination law settles on a top-down, single-axis approach, where members of a protected class are seen as sharing the same circumstances. For Crenshaw, this perspective reflects the lives of those white women and black men who confront one primary form of oppression recognized in antidiscrimination law—sexism or racism. Black women who are multiply challenged confront a bottom-up reality, fighting through layers of harm not easily reduced to either race or gender.

Crenshaw then goes on to examine how black women’s lack of fit with this dominant approach to defining discrimination provides less than desirable outcomes. The law reflects the reality of the most “privileged” members of legally recognized classes (151). According to her, the top-down, “but-for” (151) approach fails, because “[i]f Black women cannot conclusively say that ‘but for’ their race or ‘but for’ their gender they would be treated differently, they are not invited to climb through the hatch but told to wait in the unprotected margin until they can be absorbed into the broader, protected categories of race and sex” (152). For black women who are assailed by sexism and racism (again, sometimes in ways that resemble their impact on other groups, sometimes in ways that are compounded, or sometimes based on black women as a separate class), the law is inept. In one notable case, *DeGraffenreid*, for instance, the court decided that antidiscrimination law did not provide for a “super-remedy” that combined consideration of both race and sex discrimination for black women qua black women as advanced by the plaintiffs (141). The law is too narrow to address a bottom-up approach, emanating from the perspective of black women at the bottom of the social hierarchy.

Just as it prohibits the application of the law to black women’s discrimination and thereby reproduces institutional racism and sexism, this top-down approach affirms a dominant feminist praxis that universalizes white female experience as that of all women and abets white women’s avoidance of their investments in racism. Echoing criticisms of other black feminists, Crenshaw observes that white feminists often speak for women qua women in ways that deny the specificity of black women’s lives. White feminists’ discussions of rape, for instance, have often been ill-fitted for black women’s circumstances, according to Crenshaw; white feminists who pointed to rape laws as a means of securing female virtue fail to comprehend the implicit centering of the white experience in these positions (157–58). Black women’s virtue or “chastity” was something that early rape law never had as a goal (*ibid.*). Indeed, Crenshaw notes that mainstream feminism’s single-axis approach fails to relay how rape

constituted “racial terror[ism]” against black communities, and that the law aided and abetted white male access to black women’s bodies (158).

This top-down, single-axis focus Crenshaw derides is problematic because it also centers analyses of racism’s impact on black men, leaving in the shadows black women who are doubly disadvantaged by sexism and racism. Within black communities, racism is read as the principal threat to blacks’ well-being. In this light, black women who address sexism are often at cross-purposes with stated community interests geared toward fighting racism, and they are left with little support in fighting pernicious patriarchal practices.

In “Mapping the Margins,” Crenshaw (1990–91) further elaborates her theory of intersectionality by examining three forms of intersectionality—structural, political, and representational—in the context of violence against women of color. Structural intersectionality refers to the complex ways in which deeply embedded inequalities not only amplify, but also uniquely define, women of color’s confrontations with both sexism and racism. Crenshaw observes that structural intersectionality occurs, for instance, when women of color are targets of domestic violence. According to her, most shelters confront “physical assault,” but not the assault of poverty, un- or under-employment, or other underlying forms of oppression that curtail women of color’s ability to escape abuse (1245–46). Similarly, political intersectionality is evident in the persistence of antiracist and feminist social activism that adopts a singular focus on black men and white women, respectively. This single-axis approach generates discursive framings for political agitation that not only fail to address how racism and sexism impact black women, but also distort our understanding of racism and sexism. Finally, representational intersectionality identifies the ways in which cultural representations of black women condone violence against black women and the lack of response thereto. The objectification and hypersexualization of black women in music, television, and other cultural outlets are commonplace. Even when controversies develop surrounding these cultural images, they can often provide the basis for policing black male behavior in order to protect white women, as opposed to alleviating black women’s subjugation through these images.

Crenshaw deals with a range of illustrations of each form of intersectionality and their attendant rhetorical strategies, but she identifies two that are particularly relevant to this discussion. I have named these strategies that she identifies as the “universalizing tendency” and the “bait-and-switch” in order to provide a shorthand way of discussing them, further clarify their operation, and build on Crenshaw’s insights. Both the universalizing tendency and the bait-and-switch rhetorical strategies work to further marginalize women of color.

First, the universalizing tendency occurs when activists or other political actors suggest that a particular issue goes beyond the experience of women of color and is relevant to a broader community of women, the effect of which is to typically highlight the plight of white women and not that of black women.

In one poignant example, for instance, Crenshaw (1990–91) takes to task those who argue the case that domestic violence is not “only” a minority issue. When advocates, such as U.S. Senator David Boren, argue that this issue “affects . . . our wives, mothers, daughters, sisters, and colleagues,” they lay claim to the validity of this suffering as it impacts white female subjects (1260). In such cases, black women are either sidelined and/or included in a “tokenistic” manner (1260–61). They are, in effect (consciously or unconsciously), used as a pretext for talking about white females.

Conversely, in the second rhetorical strategy, the bait-and-switch, black women are focused on, but only to make visible white female suffering. This occurs, for instance, in the case of the infamous 2 Live Crew controversy, where this rap group was singled out for obscenity charges. When commentators like George Will lament what this group’s lyrics portend for black women, they do so only as a means to ultimately highlight its implications for white women (Crenshaw 1990–91, 1290–92). Here, black women stand as a proxy for would-be white victims.

These very two strategies that Crenshaw critiques are at work in the new scholarship produced under the aegis of intersectionality. As scholars ply intersectionality as a scholarly framing device, they do so in ways that undermine the central project of both the ideographic and ideational dimensions of intersectionality—that is, the political project undertaken by women of color in general and black women in particular to address the political plight of nonwhite women and the idea of intersectionality as expressed by Crenshaw. Based on both its ideographic and ideational dimensions, intersectionality can be defined as the commitment to centering research and analysis on the lived experiences of women of color for the purpose of making visible and addressing their marginalization as well as an ethos of challenging business as usual in mainstream disciplines’ habits of knowledge production. Against this backdrop, the new wave of intersectionality research in the social sciences affronts intersectionality’s central tenets. Indeed, as previously noted, the current focus on intersectionality within the social sciences is, in fact, a post-black feminist approach, one that disappears or re-marginalizes black women.

Power/Knowledge in the Social Sciences: The Disappearing Act

Re-Subjugating Black Women’s Knowledge: The Bait-and-Switch

McCall’s article “The Complexity of Intersectionality” (2005) has been widely influential. It is especially important to examine it therefore, since it exemplifies the bait-and-switch strategy Crenshaw derides. McCall focuses on revisiting the contributions of women of color scholars, but only to make visible a broader array of difference and inequality. In doing so, she fails to take seriously the insights of women of color, effectively situating their work on intersectionality as subjugated knowledge.

Notably, McCall's article has garnered attention across disciplines because she defines intersectionality more broadly than its original proponents and champions quantitative methods as a viable means of intersectionality-based research, in effect making it available to social science scholars without their having to substantively change their research methodologies. McCall frames her discussion of intersectionality in terms of the question of complexity and how it is addressed. For her, complexity relates directly to metatheoretical issues about the nature of identity itself. Poststructuralist feminists, she notes, deconstruct identity categories, such as gender, arguing that humans are "too irreducibly complex" to be captured through socially constructed categories (1773). A concomitant argument is that since identities and the categories upon which they are based are social fictions that are used to subordinate people, they should be jettisoned as a basis for politics. As McCall points out, many women of color, however, despite their critiques of the category "woman" as exclusionary of the differences among women, see identity as a focal point of research and political action (1779–80).

Against this backdrop, McCall fashions a continuum of approaches to understanding the complexity inherent in identity, namely: the anti-categorical approach, which embraces poststructuralism and thereby rejects the notion of identity categories altogether; the intra-categorical approach, which focuses on women of color's internal group understandings of their own marginalization; and the inter-categorical or categorical approach, which emphasizes comparisons for different groups along various types of identity-markers. McCall acknowledges that scholars in the second camp, the intra-categorical approach, originated intersectionality, but argues for her own interpretation—the categorical approach.

McCall argues that the categorical approach is necessary to examine the fullest range of complexity and emerging developments in inequality. For her, whereas the intra-categorical approach focuses on differences "across categories" (1781), showing aporias in analyses of race and gender, for instance, the categorical approach also focuses on differences "within" categories themselves (1786). The categorical approach is "multigroup and comparative" (1789). Each layer of comparison—women versus men, black versus white, rural versus urban, for instance—captures added layers of complexity. McCall cautions, however, that like other approaches, this one necessitates making adjustments for matters of "scale and coherence or difference and sameness" (1786–87). "If researchers," for instance, "want to examine more detailed ethnic groups within racial groups—say, Cubans, Mexicans, and Puerto Ricans within the broader category of Latino/as—it becomes necessary to limit other dimensions of the analysis, such as the gender or class dimensions, for the sake of comprehension" (1786). Still, she asserts, the approach succeeds in capturing complexity, the gold standard for assessing its utility.

McCall's analysis succeeds in amplifying several critical questions regarding feminist research, specifically: the nature of interdisciplinarity and the process by which it takes shape; the appropriate philosophy of science that should animate interdisciplinary research; and the place of quantitative methods in intersectionality research. She argues that there has been a "lag" in the incorporation of feminist insights into traditional disciplines (1783–84). For McCall, women's studies falls short of its claims to interdisciplinarity; she contends as well that feminists can use quantitative methods from a postpositivist perspective, sidestepping the claims to rationality and objectivity that feminists have criticized. Moreover, she rightly observes that women of color have often had very different investments in their critique of the category "woman": women of color view the category as socially constructed and typically centered on white women's experiences, but nevertheless focus on the impact of this fiction in their day-to-day lives, as opposed to abandoning the category, as do some poststructuralists. Women of color feminists generally support identity politics centered on complex, negotiated understandings of group interests.

Despite these interventions, however, McCall's bait-and-switch approach disappears black women and their scholarly contributions; more pointedly, her analysis does violence to the progenitors of intersectionality by subverting their aims and objectives. In recent decades, feminist ethnographers have interrogated the power relationships inherent in field research (Fernandes 1997). They have illuminated, for instance, the inherent subjectivity of the research process, often insisting on positioning themselves vis-à-vis their own social location relative to their subjects. They have experimented with a range of approaches, exposing the political nature of their work and varying interpretations of their research and positioning subjects to comment on and/or partake in their representation (see, for example, Berger 2004). The same ethics that animate ethnographic research are relevant to our discussion of intersectionality.

The central way in which McCall's (2005) approach advances a post-black feminist politics that disappears black women is through her focus on complexity. The issue is one of subjugation, not complexity. Elevating a description of identity and its lived realities to intersectionality's *raison d'être* decenters black women and women of color as the subjects of investigation. Indeed, the categorical approach, which unmoors intersectionality from women of color's lives and their multifaceted marginalization as its focus, can conceivably refer to and help to legitimate analyses produced under the rubric of intersectionality that have nothing to do with black women or women of color. We witness the decentering of women of color in studies published in political science journals that, for instance, focus on women and international relations, with no discussions of race (Ackerly and True 2008) or focus on white rural identity, invoking the idea of internal colonization associated with the Black Power era in order to describe Appalachia (White 2007), an approach best suited for whiteness studies.

Moreover, although McCall (2005) does cite a range of women of color scholars, the particular arguments and ideas they convey are generally not examined directly, but only dealt with in terms of aggregate modes of producing intersectionality research. The latent function of this move is that the different truth claims and approaches to intersectionality, epistemological challenges, and substantive contributions they make are not part of the analysis. In short, their voices remain offstage. Sidestepping the scholarly practice of reviewing the literature and carefully examining particular arguments, research findings, and their importance, McCall presents a general history, the result of which is to deprive readers of mounting their own examinations of this research. Although her article appeared in *Signs*, a women's studies venue with an audience that would undoubtedly have been aware of the works she has cited, it is reasonable to anticipate, given the broad dissemination of this journal, that her work would address multiple audiences—to travel to other fields and disciplines that would not have such a background.

McCall's approach, and especially the examples she draws from her own work on inequality, directly contradicts central tenets expressed in a variety of the theorists she cites. The Combahee River Collective's well-known statement (1982), which Barbara Smith helped to write and which was anthologized in *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies* (1982) and elsewhere, for instance, reads: "We . . . find it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously" (16). Similarly, Leela Fernandes (1997), a scholar whose work McCall notes as emphasizing the "politics of categories," writes:

What is at stake here is the longstanding notion that there are discrete boundaries that can demarcate categories such as gender, class, ethnicity. . . . The question at hand is how to further a conceptualization of such forms of "intersectionality" [here, Fernandes cites Crenshaw (1992, 404)] and move beyond an "interaction" or "interplay" between discrete identities, terms that continue to suggest static distinctions between categories of social analysis. (6)

But in her examination of inequality, McCall (2005) isolates wage inequality by gender, class, and race, suggesting the very type of severability that Smith, the Combahee River Collective, Fernandes, and other women of color reject. Notably, Bonnie Thornton Dill (2002), also cited by McCall, relates that a core principle emerging from her study of 70 faculty members working on intersectionality at seventeen universities was that to do work "'at the intersections' is an analytical strategy, an approach to understanding human life and behavior rooted in the experiences and struggles of marginalized people" (6). With a focus on categories and their interaction, McCall's work opens up space for research that is not focused on marginalized communities in general or women of color in particular.

McCall's (2005) bait-and-switch approach also disappears black women by enhancing the subjugation of their knowledge. As Michel Foucault (1980) has well argued, subjugated knowledges are those knowledges that are either hidden, because they fall short of the requirements of dominant, authorized knowledge or that are deemed to lack the necessary rigor of investigation. Subjugated knowledges, he explains, "have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naïve knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity" (82). The "insurrection" of such knowledges, for Foucault, disrupts dominant, "unified" modes of knowledge production and received truths (80–81). For black feminist sociologist Patricia Hill Collins (2000), black feminist knowledge is subjugated knowledge—not knowledge, she emphasizes, that is, in fact, "naïve," but rather knowledge perceived in this way because of "those controlling knowledge validation procedures" (291). She further notes: "More recently, higher education and the news media have emerged as increasingly important sites for Black feminist intellectual activity. Within these new social locations, Black feminist thought has often become highly visible, yet curiously, despite this visibility, it has become differently subjugated" (252). The emphasis on race, class, and gender in academe or the showcasing of black female authors, such as Ntozake Shange, coexists with appropriations of black women's work. The visibility does not translate into authority to retain voice or serve as a shield from appropriation.

McCall (2005) installs intersectionality as "naïve" knowledge by arguing that intersectionality research focuses on narratives or utilizing other non-quantitative approaches that cannot capture the complexity of the current social terrain.⁵ The categorical approach is required, for her, in order to attend to emerging areas of research, for which the intra-categorical approach may be inadequate. In the case of her own research, McCall avers that the current state of wage inequality differs from prior time periods and cannot be adequately addressed by an intra-categorical approach; the categorical approach is necessary to comprehend large-scale shifts in inequality and to make the broadest range of comparisons regarding social identity. What McCall fails to directly grapple with, however, are the implicit and explicit epistemological challenges that black women, along with feminists in general, have made to the positivist approach. It is not merely a matter of preference or availability of methods; intersectionality scholars in different fields have been keenly aware of and co-participants in feminist debates about the nature of knowledge production. They have chosen disciplines that allow them greater latitude and/or refashioned them in ways that press against received standards of inquiry. Their efforts to create new or to adapt existing hermeneutical methodologies bring into play sensibilities that, when taken together, reflect new forms of knowledge unable to be captured by quantitative methods.

McCall also takes feminists and implicitly, since her focus is intersectionality, especially women of color to task for failing to be truly interdisciplinary.

Women's studies, which claims the banner of interdisciplinarity, should embrace quantitative approaches in the spirit of furthering interdisciplinary investigation. McCall, moreover, anticipating obvious objections from feminists who have exposed the limitations of positivism, suggests that quantitative methods can be used within a postpositivist frame—that is, eschewing assumptions of rationality and objectivity. For her, it is only through quantitative studies with large sample sizes that can compare different vectors of analysis that we can grasp contemporary social inequality.

But such analyses fail to relay the exclusionary strength of the positivist approach in fields like sociology and political science. In other words, it is not just that there are “time lags” (McCall 2005, 1784) in terms of incorporating feminism into certain disciplines. The neo-positivist norm of social science disciplines exerts a powerful force in preferred methods. And, while she asserts that her quantitative approach expands interdisciplinarity in women's studies, on the contrary, it conforms intersectionality to the positivist dictates of traditional disciplines. At best, what McCall offers is a cross-disciplinary approach because it utilizes concepts or approaches from one field although in ways that do not deeply integrate them or alter modes of investigation. Most postpositivists who advocate investigation of inequality, moreover, focus on social locatedness, experience, and contingent truth claims (see, for example, Alcoff, Hames-Garcia, Mohanty, and Moya 2006; Gillman 2010).

Re-Subjugating Black Women's Knowledge: The Universalizing Tendency

In contrast to McCall's (2005) bait-and-switch approach, Hancock (2007a) adopts the universalizing tendency. Her approach displaces black women's and other women of color's subjectivity by appealing to a broader interpretation of intersectionality. Hancock suggests that intersectionality is not exclusively the domain of women of color, but is available to all equally. Indeed, she consistently argues that intersectionality is best understood as a general research paradigm, stating that women of color have generated various streams of intersectional research. She maintains, however, that intersectionality constituted a “content-based specialization”; that is, it focused on the experiences of marginalized women and their fight for “inclusion” (248). She discusses the evolution of her thinking, however, which has caused her to focus on a “broader” reading or application of intersectionality, namely: intersectionality as “a normative and empirical research paradigm” (249). Hancock hopes to offer “conceptual clarity” and the “bang for our . . . buck” of everyone accessing intersectionality as a research paradigm (250). For Hancock, intersectionality involves six presuppositions, namely that: “more than one category of difference (e.g. race, gender, class) plays a role in examinations of complex political problems and processes”; we cannot “assume”—but must “empirical[ly]” examine—connections between categories and their operation; intersectionality must address the “individual and institutional” dynamics of politics; researchers must recognize heterogeneity

within groups; studies should focus on the interaction of the individual and institutional levels of politics; and “empirical and theoretical aspects of the research question” must be accounted for and “multiple methods” should be utilized (251). Additionally, in her most noted piece on intersectionality, she presses for the use of fuzzy logic in quantitative methods as a means of better grasping the complexity of politics (Hancock 2007b). Although these elements may be present in other approaches, she avers, only intersectionality involves them all and has its origins at least in “women of color as a content specialization” (2007a, 251).

Hancock goes on to explain why intersectionality is important outside of studying women of color. She asks: “What if, as noble a pursuit as it is, *I do not wish to study women of color? What can I gain from intersectionality?*” (ibid.; emphasis added). Like McCall, Hancock points to the notion of complexity—or, more specifically, “causal complexity”—as the basis for intersectionality’s benefit (ibid.). For Hancock, there is a broader range of concerns ostensibly opened up when intersectionality does not focus on women of color or race, but is conceived as a research paradigm based on a general theory of identity. Using welfare policy as an example, for instance, she argues that a focus on assisting mothers in obtaining child support—a common objective in welfare policy—does not address the needs of those women whose co-parents are indigent or lesbians who are not legally situated to obtain such rights. She states that “[w]hile intersectionality as a content-specialization [that is, focusing on women of color] would emphasize the subjectivity of women residing at categorical intersections, intersectionality as a research paradigm does not end there” (252). “Gender, class, and sexual orientation” all have to be taken into account (ibid.). Hancock’s formulation implies that such issues are presumably missed when women of color are the center of analysis.

Hancock’s efforts to highlight identity as a factor in political analysis are in marked contrast to the mainstream of political science. Although women and politics and race and ethnic politics have emerged as subfields during the past forty years, the discipline as a whole has neglected to accord race and gender—or class, sexuality, and nation—the scholarly attention their roles in politics warrant (Pinderhughes 2009). Thus Hancock’s (2007a, 2007b) aim to broaden the influence of intersectionality within mainstream political science is laudable. Others have utilized intersectionality in their research within political science, of course. The re-visioning of intersectionality that Hancock presents, however, is designed to give it greater appeal in the discipline in ways that undermine black women and other women of color and intersectionality’s potentially transformative power. Indeed, the universalizing tendency in Hancock’s work constitutes a post-black feminist reading of intersectionality that disappears black women in several ways. First, as with McCall, Hancock’s formulation does violence to those scholars who have developed intersectionality. The distinction she asserts between intersectionality as a content specialty

versus a research paradigm is more apparent than real. She notes that “[p]aradigms . . . represent a set of basic beliefs or a worldview that precedes any questions of empirical investigation . . . [and] provides a wealth of problems to be investigated and forces the analyses of such problems to attain a detail and depth that is otherwise out of reach” (2007b, 64). Intersectionality as both ideograph and idea meets the definition of paradigm.

As previously noted, despite the differences among feminists of color, intersectionality has focused on de-marginalizing women of color both as subjects of research and in formal and informal politics. Women of color have been concerned about illuminating the operation of power through class, race, sexuality, and social inequality. The welfare example Hancock uses, for instance, is problematic not because of the issues it raises, but because it neglects the fact that black women have theorized intersectionality in a way that would take issues of “gender, class, and sexual orientation” (2007a, 252) into account and, moreover, that these cannot be considered outside of race, specifically as they relate to black women. The distinction Hancock asserts between presumably older and newer forms of intersectionality does violence to women of color knowledge producers who have labored to generate scholarship beneficial to women of color and their communities. It de-authorizes them as knowledge producers who are able to discern their own epistemological priorities and utilize their own choice of methods. To be sure, all intersectionality operates within the context of a research paradigm, although the contours of its substance may differ.

A second way in which Hancock’s (2007a, 2007b) universalizing tendency disappears black women is through a politics of citation that does not reflect a genealogy of research in political science and other fields. In this historical moment and cultural context, citation is one of the primary currencies of academic exchange and a foundation of scholarly practice. It allows us to reevaluate authors and their arguments. It also, ideally, situates one’s own work within a community of scholars with whom one is conversant. In Hancock’s most influential piece on intersectionality, for instance, published in *Perspectives on Politics* (2007b), one of the two top journals in the discipline, she acknowledges that intersectionality informs work in political science; however, in large measure, she does not cite or grapple with work produced by earlier scholars like Mae King (1977), Jewel Prestage (1991), or Gloria Braxton (1994) on black women as political actors and black gender politics. Nor does she cite contemporaries, such as Duchess Harris (2001), Julia Jordan-Zachery (2001), or Michele Tracy Berger (2004), among others. In her elaboration of intersectionality, in fact, she focuses attention on the work of black male legal scholar Derrick Bell. Not including discussion or citation of prior and contemporaneous scholarship serves to silence these scholars, presenting a limited view of the breadth of intersectionality in political science and encouraging others to sidestep their work.

In contrast to this nongenealogical “politics of citation” (Chang 2009, 28), scholars should work to address a broad range of work produced under

the purview of intersectionality. Richard Delgado, a founder of Critical Race Theory, penned an (in)famous essay, “The Imperial Scholar” (1984), that criticized an insular community of white legal scholars that cited one another, to the exclusion of minority colleagues; such practices impoverished scholarly investigation and undermined the work and careers of minority scholars (qtd. in *ibid.*). Likewise, in the context of intersectionality research in political science, it is equally necessary to attend to the politics of citation. In an effort to highlight our own unique contributions, we all, as scholars, can fall prey to underemphasizing the works of others; but it is particularly important to acknowledge other laborers as discussions of intersectionality in political science continue to unfold. This is particularly true for black and other women of color interlocutors, because minority women’s scholarship is often undervalued as a general matter and because they generated the intersectional approach. Citation is also important as a means of resisting the intramural competition to lay claim to expert status that can result with any emerging conversation.

A third way in which Hancock’s (2007b) universalizing tendency represents a post-black feminist approach to intersectionality that disappears black women is through its privileging of dominant modes of knowledge production in the discipline. The relegation of intersectionality to a content specialization, as opposed to a research paradigm, voids its standing as a vibrant, complex body of knowledge, implicitly suggesting that its knowledge is naïve or nonempirical. Indeed, her arguments concerning intersectionality turn on a tacit equation of it as a research paradigm with “empirical research,” where “empirical” is identified exclusively with quantitative methods (64). But “[t]he word *empiricism* is derived from the Greek *εμπειρια* (*empeiria*), the Latin translation of which is *experientia*, from which in turn we derive the word *experience*” (Hamlyn 2005, 214; emphasis in original). Thus as philosophers have long noted, empirical refers to knowledge derived from experience and/or observation. This includes, of course, experience as reflected in survey data, but also in a broad range of knowledge derived from interpreting or “knowing” human experience. White’s ([1985]1999) rich historical analysis of black women and slavery, which is based on extensive archival research, for instance, is empirical. Chandra T. Mohanty’s (1991) critical reading and examination of feminist texts in her classic work “Under Western Eyes” qualifies as empirical. Barbara Christian’s (1997) assessment of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* in light of African cosmology is empirical, as is the ethnographic research conducted by feminist political scientist Leela Fernandes (1997). Notably, postpositivist realism is also empirical while taking into account the standpoint of people of color (Gillman 2010). What joins these various methods is their focus on experience as a basis for knowledge. Although philosophers of science debate the meaning of empiricism, it is an academic conceit to conflate empirical work with only quantitative methods.

Of course, some might argue that Hancock (2007b), like McCall, does not merely embrace existing methods, but works to push the boundaries of existing

methodology. Tailoring intersectionality to conform to received methodological priorities within disciplines, however, feeds into the dominance of positivist approaches. This is the case, because regardless of what their stated efforts might be, such attempts still center attention on and legitimize quantitative research as the touchstone for what constitutes valid knowledge production. A critical race black feminist approach (Alexander-Floyd 2010) works not merely to shift existing parameters, but to create new ones altogether.

As noted at the outset, disciplinary pressure to conform research to dominant modes of inquiry constitutes one of the major forces shaping intersectionality. Underlying the push for “empirical” research is the siren call of scientific validity. Although feminists and others who are nonpositivists have assailed its claims, positivism’s magnetic pull still draws our attention to quantitative research as our center of scholarly authority. Appeals to empiricism in the name of championing intersectionality in political science more broadly disqualifies and diminishes scholarship that seeks to focus on women of color’s marginalization and the varied forces through which they are assailed. In a related vein, although women of color social scientists like Hancock may draw on their lived identity in some part to think through intersectionality in their work, disciplinary strictures condition intersectionality’s expression in their work in ways that are more determinative than their subject-position. Of course, the subject-position of women of color adherents to post-black feminist intersectionality adds legitimacy to its support, particularly among white scholars, as it travels within the mainstream of disciplines.

Finally, efforts to systematize intersectionality should be viewed with skepticism, as they also ultimately work to disappear black women by altering their knowledge production in ways that undermine its import. Hancock (2007b) argues that “[c]alls have emerged for the consolidation of intersectional research into a paradigm that animates work” in a variety of fields, offering her work as one such effort (64). Calls to “unify” knowledge present opportunities for “re-codification” and “re-colonization” (Foucault 1980, 86). Current efforts to universalize intersectionality, to consolidate its meaning such that it is disconnected from the lived experiences of women of color and made available to larger numbers because of a focus on an academic demand for quantitative methods, can serve to colonize intersectionality and redeploy it in ways that deplete its radical potential. Indeed, at its best, intersectionality decenters the project of positivism and neo-positivism altogether.

Conclusion

Although the recent enthusiasm about intersectionality should ostensibly promise a broadening of research based on black feminist insights, as a practical matter the various interpretations, as work from the aforementioned scholars demonstrate, disarticulate intersectionality from its theoretical, political, and

methodological roots, replacing it instead with a re-instantiation of essentialist forms of identity politics and/or dominant research models—for example, quantitative research about difference or that simply describes political behavior (Jordan-Zachery 2007). As I demonstrate throughout, the voices, intellectual contributions, and political projects of black feminists magically disappear or are supplanted by post-black feminist readings of intersectionality. The question, of course, is what is to be done?

There are three things that are important in order to maintain the integrity of intersectionality as it is further integrated into social sciences. First, intersectionality research must focus on illuminating women of color as political subjects and the gender, racial, class, and sexual politics that impact their lives. Other research on white women or other groups can, of course, be usefully informed by intersectionality. But in order to avoid further (neo)colonization of this term, intersectionality research must be properly understood as the purview of researchers investigating women of color. Scholars who do not focus on women of color as political actors should develop new terms, concepts, and approaches in order to illuminate other experiences and investigate the questions at the center of their research. Some might argue that focusing on women of color in general or black women in particular renders a determinist or essentialist argument about intersectionality and/or women of color; but although racial categories like “black” are racial formations and therefore constantly shifting, this does not mean that having the identity of black does not have real material effects. We can talk about intersectionality without reifying these categories, acknowledging that intersectionality is a tool that allows individuals pertaining to a particular racial group—for example, black female—to contest the meanings of these categories and refashion them. Furthermore, a focus on women of color acknowledges their prerogative to authorize their own frameworks for producing knowledge specifically relevant to their lives. The question of maintaining the integrity of the intellectual project of intersectionality cannot be reduced to claims of determinism or essentialism.

Second, scholars can disrupt the (neo)colonization of intersectionality by centering the voices of black women and other women of color in their research and classrooms. Doing so is critical in recognizing the scholarly authority of women of color who have forged intersectionality both ideographically and ideationally.

Finally, the key to disrupting the colonization of intersectionality is an insistence on taking seriously the epistemological challenges presented by women of color intersectionality scholars. The question of intersectionality’s amenability to quantitative work is beyond this article’s scope. To be sure, many women of color scholars struggle to challenge or negotiate disciplinary norms, particularly in terms of methodology, while producing culturally relevant and/or liberatory knowledge (see, for example, the edited volume by Dill and Zambrana 2009). In this light, it is worth noting that it was not coincidental that there was a certain

assiduousness with which scholars across different camps of black feminism embraced the production and/or analysis of narratives. Narrative production and analysis is a well-worn method for intersectionality scholars, and with good reason: it affords an opportunity to make women of color's experiences visible in complex ways, opposes the devaluation of subjectivity in research and evaluation, and provides a means of disentangling the myriad forces that work to maintain hegemonic understandings of politics and culture. Indeed, a focus on the production and assessment of narratives is a way of taking up part of the legacy of intersectionality both ideographically and ideationally by advancing its defining elements—namely, producing liberatory research centered on the lives of women of color and positively transforming dominant modes of knowledge production. Scholars across disciplines have recognized the importance of narratives, and Crenshaw's (1989, 1990–91) idea of intersectionality took shape in the ascent of Critical Race Theory in the law, which is known for its use of narrative to undermine notions of rationality and objectivity. Scholars such as Richard Delgado, Derrick Bell, Patricia Williams, and Mari Matsuda, to name a few, have privileged narratives as a means of legal and political reasoning. In political science, scholars like Fernandes and Jordan-Zachery have done intersectionality-informed work, examining narratives in terms of ethnographic research and state-generated discourse, respectively. To be sure, narrative as the basis of interpretive and qualitative methodology can serve to dismantle the master's tools (Lorde 1984) in the production of a new black and women of color feminist social science.

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Notes

1. Although they share a priority on quantitative methodologies, political science and sociology have noteworthy differences. Unlike political science, sociology is regarded as a “feminized” discipline—that is, it actually has more female scholars than male. Also, intersectional scholarship is far more widespread in sociology. Indeed, both the journal *Race, Gender, and Class*, published since 1993, and the American Sociological Association’s section bearing the same name testify to this broader support. In contrast, although the National Conference of Black Political Scientists and the Western Political Science Association have “Women and Politics and Feminist Theory” and “Intersectionality” sections, respectively, and there is a newly formed Association for the Study of Black Women in Politics, there is no formal section in the American Political Science Association for the study of race, gender, and class, or a journal in the field dedicated to such research. For a discussion of various approaches to investigating intersectionality in sociology, see Hae Yeon Choo and Myra Marx Ferree (2010). Also see Carol Hardy-Fanta (2006) for a sample of work in political science.

2. McCall’s article “The Complexity of Intersectionality” (2005) in *Signs* has been influential across disciplines and has, more than any other piece, framed the general context for the emergence of post-black feminist intersectionality. It has 443 citations on Google Scholar and is the most downloaded and cited article to ever appear in *Signs*. McCall’s article is cited in each of Ange-Marie Hancock’s major works on intersectionality, a particularly important point given that she does not typically reference a wide variety of work on intersectionality. Hancock’s perspective, in turn, has dominated discussions of intersectionality in political science. Her article “When Multiplication Doesn’t Equal Quick Addition” (2007b), published in *Perspectives on Politics* (the second leading journal in the discipline), garners 197 cites on Google Scholar and is ranked first in the top ten articles cited for the journal. Another piece of hers, “Intersectionality as a Normative and Empirical Paradigm” (2007a), has twenty-eight Google Scholar citations and is ranked third in the top-ten downloaded articles for *Politics & Gender*. Although citation analysis is inexact, these bibliometric measures convey a general sense of these respective works’ importance.

3. Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987) is a Latina classic of intersectionality, for instance. Also, the term has impacted political and scholarly discourse in other geopolitical contexts. See, for instance, Avtar Brah and Ann Phoenix’s (2005) discussion of intersectionality among British women, as well as the edited collection by Bonnie Thornton Dill and Ruth Enid Zambrana (2009).

4. Andrea Simpson notes that she was among other women of color scholars at an American University conference, “EnGENDERING Theories of Difference and Commonality” (April 2008), who raised issues about crediting women of color, particularly black women, with starting intersectionality. She reminded an audience of this as she made similar comments later that year during the Q&A period of the final session at an American Political Science Association Intersectionality Short Course.

5. McCall’s (2005) work invites and enables criticisms of intersectionality scholars’ perceived lack of sophistication or inadequate methodological elaboration; see, for example, Jennifer Nash (2008).

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